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ABSTRACT

This study examines the efficacy of specially devised information in altering students' perceptions of the appropriateness of personal problems for counseling and their willingness to seek counseling for such problems. Women at a large Eastern university provided the sample for this study; one group received oral-written information, another group received written information only, and a third control group received neither oral nor written information. The results indicate that students who received both written and orally-presented information showed an increase on these dependent variables, while students receiving only written information did not. Consequently, the conclusion was drawn that written information may inform students of the availability of counseling, but it does not alter their impression of kinds of problems appropriate for counseling sessions. (Author/SES)

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Charles J. Gelso and James D. Mc Kenzie

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with Warman's (1960) study, research has consistently indicated that students (and other campus groups) perceive personal-social problems as much less appropriate to discuss with counselors than do counselors themselves. The present study was the first one which examined the efficacy of specially-devised information in altering students' perceptions of the appropriateness of personal problems for counseling and their willingness to seek counseling for such problems. It was found that students who received both written and orally-presented information showed an increment on these dependent variables, while students receiving only written information did not. In light of past research, it was concluded that written information may inform or remind students of the availability of counseling, but, in itself, does not alter their impression of the types of problems appropriate for counseling.

EFFECT OF INFORMATION ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COUNSELING AND THEIR WILLINGNESS TO SEEK HELP

Over a decade ago Warman (1960) found that college counselors viewed personal adjustment problems as much more appropriate for students to seek help with at a university counseling center than did other campus groups (clients, faculty, student personnel workers). Warman attributed the discrepancy to the fact that counseling psychology had undergone much change over a brief time period. Thus, campus groups other than counselors continued to adhere to the once-valid belief that counselors treated primarily educational-vocational problems. Since this belief was no longer valid, Warman suggested that counselors must better educate and orient their publics about the range of student problems with which they dealt.

Because several years have elapsed since Warman's research, it would seem reasonable to expect that the job of educating the university community about the problems with which counselors should and do work has been largely accomplished. Recent research, however, indicates that the "communication gap" uncovered by Warman continues to exist (Gelso, Karl & O'Connell, 1972; Resnick & Gelso, 1971; Wilcove & Sharp, 1971). Counselors still view personal problems as much more appropriate for clients to seek help with from counseling centers than do clients, non-client students, faculty, student personnel workers and parents. In addition, students generally feel they have little information about the counseling centers on their campuses (Gelso et. al., 1972; Snyder, Hill & Derksen, 1972).

While all studies on "problem appropriateness" have underscored the need to inform more effectively the university community, no research heretofore has examined the efficacy of various modes of information dissemination in correcting the miscommunication between counselors and other groups. Thus, much time and effort have been spent identifying the problem but next to no energy has been exerted in studying means of remedying it.

The general purpose of the present study was to determine whether students' perceptions of the kinds of problems which are appropriate for discussion with counselors and their willingness to seek help for various problems can be altered by specially-designed written and orally-presented information. Past research has typically found that students and counselors agree on the appropriateness of educational and vocational problems for discussion with counselors (Gelso, et.al., 1972; Wilcove & Sharp, 1971). As indicated, it is in the area of personal-adjustment problems that marked discrepancies exist. Thus, the specific purposes of the present study were to (a) determine if students' perceptions of the appropriateness of discussing personal problems with counselors and their willingness to do so can be increased by specially-designed information and (b) compare the efficacy of written information with information that is presented both orally and in writing. Because past research has raised the question of whether perceived knowledge about a counseling center is related to actual amount of knowledge (Snyder et.al., 1972), a secondary purpose of the study was to compare the effect of information on students' perceptions of the amount of knowledge they possessed about a counseling center.

Method

Sample

Selected floors within two women's residence halls at a large Eastern university were the target areas for the study. The residence halls were approximately one-quarter of a mile from each other, were both about the same distance from the counseling center and were approximately equal in student composition. Selection of floors within the halls was guided by the following rules: (a) at least one floor must separate a floor receiving one treatment from that receiving another treatment (including control treatment) so that the "spread effect" of a treatment would be an unlikely source of confounding; (b) subjects on each floor would be

as representative as possible of the residential female population of the university in terms of race and class, two variables which influence perceptions of counseling (Tanney, 1972; Wilcove & Sharp, 1971); (c) each treatment group would contain at least one floor from both residence halls. In its final form, the design contained two experimental groups, each subsuming four floors with 65 students per floor (all floors were filled to capacity; n=260 per experimental group). It also contained a control group consisting of two regular floors (65 students each) and a half floor with 31 students (n=161).

Treatment

The experiment was begun during the sixth week of the 1971 autumn semester. The treatment groups and treatments were as follows: The oral-written information group received a 10-15 minute oral presentation from the two investigators during weekly floor meetings. The presentation underscored the appropriateness of students seeking help from the counseling center when they had personal problems. It was indicated that both "severe" and "normal" personal problems were appropriate, and the variety of types of personal problems that were appropriate were enumerated. The presenters answered students' questions following the presentations. Approximately 60 percent of the subjects in this group were present during the four floor meetings. The day after the oral presentations, written information was distributed in all subjects' mailboxes. This information consisted of a specially-written cover letter signed by the director of the counseling center and a counseling center brochure. The cover letter made the same points as the oral presentation and the brochure was, to the experimenters' knowledge, a rather typical three-page counseling center brochure. The written-information only group received the same written information at the same time as the oral-written information group. Finally, the control group was given neither oral nor written information. The above treatments were completed by the seventh week of the semester.

It should be noted that subjects were not completely naive prior to the experiment. In addition to informal sources of information, all students at the university receive both written and orally-presented information about the center during their summer freshman orientation. Such information, however, is not specially devised to correct misperceptions about counseling.

Post-testing and Instrumentation

To assess the efficacy of the treatment procedures, subjects were post-tested during the 13-14th week of the Autumn semester. Testing was done during weekly floor meetings and approximately 60 percent of the subjects were present during these meetings. The percentages present did not differ significantly among treatments. Due to scheduling problems, only three of the four floors in the oral-written information group (n=121) and two of the three floors in the control group (n=56) were post-tested. All four floors (n=139) in the written information only group were tested.

Warman's (1960) Counseling Appropriateness Check List, which contains 66 statements of student problems, was administered during the post-testing session. Subjects complete the Check List by rating the extent to which they feel each problem is appropriate for a student to discuss with a counselor at the counseling center. Ratings may range from 1 (definitely inappropriate) to 5 (most appropriate). The Check List contains three factors. College Routine (12 items) contains statements representing adjustment to the necessities and routine of academic life, e.g., study methods and time usage. Vocational Choice (14 items) represents concern for long-range career planning. Adjustment to Self and Others (40 items) reflects both interpersonal and intrapersonal adjustment (see Warman, 1960, for further descriptions). Several studies have employed this instrument (Gelso, et.al., 1972; Ogston, Altman & Conklin, 1969; Resnick & Gelso, 1971; Warman, 1960, 1961; Wilcove & Sharp, 1971), and

the Ogston et.al. study (1969) supported the original factor structure found by Warman (1960).

To examine perceptions of the appropriateness of both "normal" and "severe" problems, subjects responded to two specially-devised items asking them to rate the extent to which it is appropriate for students: (a) "to seek help with severe psychological problems at the University Counseling Center"; (b) "who are not 'psychologically disturbed' to seek help with 'normal' personal-social problems at the University Counseling Center."

Willingness to seek help was assessed in two ways. First, subjects responded during the post-testing session to the following questions: "Assuming that you had concerns with which you felt you needed help, would you consider seeking help at the University Counseling Center (a) if the problems were personal? (b) if the problems were vocational (educational-vocational choice)? (c) if the problems were educational (reading-study skills)? Second, willingness to seek help was examined behaviorally by totaling the number of subjects from each treatment group who actually sought counseling at the Center during the remainder (after sixth week) of the Autumn semester and the entire Spring semester, and the numbers of counseling interviews in which subjects participated. Number of interviews was checked because this probably reflects, at least to a degree, the "personalness" of students' problems.

Finally, during the post-testing session subjects rated the extent to which they were familiar with the services and functions of the Center. Alternatives were: (a) pretty uncertain, (b) a fair knowledge, (c) a good knowledge.

Results

Perceptions of Appropriateness

One-way analyses of variance were performed on the scores on the Counseling Appropriateness Check List and on the two items pertaining to the appropriateness

of normal and severe problems. Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and mean item scores for the three treatment groups on these measures. The two columns on the righthand portion of the table present F ratios from the analyses of variance and probability levels for each analysis.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Table 1 reveals that, as expected, no between-treatment differences appear on the College Routine or Vocational Choice scales of the Check List. Mean item scores indicate that all groups rated items on these scales high in appropriateness ($\bar{x}$'s $\geq$ 4.0). Between-group differences, however, do emerge on the Adjustment to Self and Others scale ($F=5.68$, $p < .01$). Duncan's Multiple-range Test indicated that the mean of the oral-written group was higher ($p < .01$) than either the written-only group or the control group. The latter two groups, however, did not differ from each other ($p > .05$).

Table 1 also indicates that between-treatment means attain significance on the items measuring the appropriateness for counseling of severe psychological problems ($F=4.61$, $p < .01$). Duncan's Multiple-range Test revealed that ratings by the oral-written information group again were higher than those by the written only ($p < .05$) and control ($p < .01$) group. The item on the appropriateness of normal personal-social problems did not attain significance, although between-treatment differences are in the same direction as those for the item on the appropriateness of severe problems.

The same comparisons as reflected in Table 1 were made for freshmen and upperclassmen separately, and the results were almost identical to those above. Also, separate analyses of variance were computed between residence-hall floors, within treatment groups. Of the 15 analyses (five criterion measures by three treatment

groups), only two attained statistical significance, suggesting much between-floor consistency regarding perceptions of the appropriateness of seeking counseling for the kinds of problems examined here.

Willingness to Seek Help

Table 2 presents numbers and percentages of subjects in the three treatment groups who indicated that they would consider seeking help from the Center for educational, vocational or personal problems. An equally large percentage in each treatment group responded affirmatively for educational and vocational problems ($\% \geq 80$). The percentage who would seek help with personal problems is consistently lower, and the differences among groups approaches statistical significance. Separate χ^2's were computed between each pair of groups on this item. The difference between the oral-written group and the control group attained significance ($\chi^2=5.14$, $p=.03$), while none of the others did so. Also, the same patterns emerged when freshmen and upperclassmen were subjected to the same comparisons as above.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The behavioral check on help-seeking was conducted by subtracting the number of subjects in each treatment group who sought counseling prior to the experimental manipulations (first six weeks of Autumn semester) from the number seeking counseling during the remainder of Autumn semester and the Spring semester. The following numbers emerged: oral-written=14, written only=13, control=7 (latter number corrected to take into account the smallerr n of the control group). With such small n's relative to the size of the entire sample (as would be expected over just two semesters), there is no really adequate way of testing for between-group statistical significance. However, statistical comparisons may be made of the number of subjects among the three treatment groups who sought counseling following the experimental

manipulations as compared to the numbers who sought it prior to the manipulations (first six weeks of Autumn semester). The figures in this comparison were as follows: pre-treatment oral-written=2, written only=1, control group=2; post-treatment oral-written=16, written only=14, control=7. Tocher's modification of Fisher's Exact Probability Test (Siegel, 1956, p. 101) revealed that the pre- versus post-treatment was greater for the oral-written and written only groups combined than the control group ($p < .05$). No other combinations attained significance.

As a behavioral check on the effect of the treatments on the "personalness" of problems with which subjects sought counseling, the numbers of counseling sessions in which subjects participated was compared. The mean numbers of sessions for subjects in each treatment group were: oral-written=4.31, written only=2.50, control=1.89. Due to the small n's and skewedness in the curve of the oral-written group, parametric comparisons were not made. The Mann-Whitney U Test (Siegel, 1956, p. 116), however, indicated that the difference between the oral-written and control groups attained significance ($p < .05$).

Perceived-Knowledge of the Counseling Center

Since so few subjects in each treatment group felt they possessed a good knowledge of the Center's services and functions, subjects who indicated they had such knowledge were combined with those who felt they possessed a fair knowledge. The frequency of subjects among the three treatment groups who selected these two alternatives (good or fair) on the post-test was compared with those who claimed to be uncertain of the roles and functions of the Center. It was found that 61% of the subjects in the oral-written group had a good or fair knowledge of the Center, while only 49% of those in the written-only group and 41% of the control group felt similarly ($\chi^2=7.30$, $p < .05$). This pattern holds up for both freshmen

and upperclassmen, although it does not attain statistical significance for the latter group.

Discussion

As indicated, students and other relevant campus groups have persistently viewed personal-adjustment problems as much less appropriate for treatment at university counseling centers than have professional counselors. The present results may shed light on why counselors have not reduced this communication gap appreciably over the years. The results indicate that written information, the most common mode through which counselors inform their publics (e.g., Bigelow, Hendrix & Jensen, 1968), appears to be relatively ineffective in altering students' perceptions of the appropriateness of personal problems for treatment by counselors. This is true even when the information is specifically tailored to alter such perceptions. However, it appears that information presented in person by counselors, when added to written information, does seem to modify students' (at least female students') perceptions so that they are more congruent with those of counselors.

The results also raise the question of whether written information has any value at all. An experiment by Bigelow et.al. (1968) indicates that the distribution of counseling center brochures does result in increased use of counseling services by students. This finding is corroborated by a portion of the behavioral data in the present study. That is, students receiving only written information sought counseling at about the same rate as those receiving written and orally-presented information. Both groups sought counseling at a greater rate than did students receiving no information.

When the present results are combined with those of Bigelow et.al., it seems reasonable to conclude that written information serves to increase help-seeking in general. Yet this mode of information dissemination, in itself, does not alter

students' perceptions of the appropriateness for counseling of personal problems or students' willingness to seek help for such problems. Thus, written information may simply inform or remind students of the existence of a service. A more powerful procedure (counselor presenting information in person) is required to change misperceptions of the counselor's role, misperceptions which have probably been cultivated throughout students' earlier (e.g., high school) educational experiences (cf. Tyler, 1969, pp 19-20).

To summarize, over a decade ago Warman found that relevant campus groups viewed personal-adjustment problems as much less appropriate for counselors to treat than did counselors themselves. This miscommunication between counselors and other groups (including students and clients) still appears to exist. The moral of the present empirical story appears to be that if counselors wish to attenuate this problem (better orient and educate their publics in Warman's terms), they need to present their views in vivo as well as to distribute brochures and other pieces of written information.

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Table 1

Ratings of the Appropriateness of the Various Problem types for Treatment at the Counseling Center*

	Oral-Written (n = 121)			Written Only (n = 139)			Control (n = 56)				
Factors and Items	Mean	SD	MIS	Mean	SD	MIS	Mean	SD	MIS	F ratio	p value
College Routine factor (12 items)	50.1	7.9	4.2	50.9	8.7	4.2	52.2	6.9	4.4	1.31	.27
Vocational Choice factor (14 items)	56.3	8.9	4.0	56.5	9.1	4.0	56.1	7.7	4.0	.05	.95
Adjustment to Self and Others factor (40 items)	139.7	33.8	3.5	125.0	39.5	3.1	126.2	34.1	3.2	5.68	.01
Appropriateness of seeking help with Severe Psychological Problems (1 item)	5.7	1.6	5.7	5.1	1.9	5.1	4.8	1.5	4.8	4.61	.01
Appropriateness of seeking help with "normal" personal-social problems (1 item)	5.6	1.5	5.6	5.3	1.6	5.3	5.2	1.4	5.2	1.53	.21

* The last two items were rated in a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (inappropriate) to 7 (highly appropriate). Mean item scores for these two items are identical to the means because responses are to single items.

Table 2

Comparison of Perceptions of Willingness to Seek Help Across Treatment Groups

Item	Alternatives	Treatment Groups: Oral-Written freq.	Oral-Written pct.	Written Only freq.	Written Only pct.	Control freq.	Control pct.	χ^2	P
Would Seek Help for Personal Problems	Yes	50	43	48	36	16	29		
	No	65	57	87	64	39	71	3.63	.15
Would Seek Help for Vocational Problems	Yes	107	89	120	89	47	86		
	No	13	11	15	11	8	14	.56	.75
Would Seek Help for Educational Problems	Yes	103	86	114	84	44	80		
	No	17	14	21	16	11	20	.98	.61